

*****This syllabus is from the latest offering of this course in Fall '21***
Syllabus is subject to change!**

**Hist 418-401: French Thought Since 1945: Existentialism, Structuralism,
Poststructuralism**

**Fall 2021
Van Pelt 627
Tuesday 3:30-6:30**

WARREN BRECKMAN
206E College Hall
Office Hours: Wednesday 11:00-12:00, or by Appointment
215-898-8518
breckman@sas.upenn.edu

In no other period, with the possible exception of the European Enlightenment, has French thought enjoyed greater international influence than in the decades after the Second World War. From Existentialism, through Structuralism, Poststructuralism, and Postmodernism, French thinkers played a crucial role in shaping the intellectual history of the second half of the twentieth century. This seminar will survey the intellectual movements and some of the key figures of this period. While our discussion will touch on many themes, the core of our inquiry will be the status of the human subject. If late nineteenth and early twentieth-century thinkers were preoccupied by the question of the “death of God,” French philosophical discourse in the late twentieth century was famously obsessed by the death of “Man”. Jean-Paul Sartre’s “The Humanism of Existentialism” opened the post-war era by declaring that the death of God heralded an unprecedented age of Man; soon that proclamation came under attack as rival thinkers of the post-war period subjected the idea of the human “subject” -- the “self” or “ego” -- to unprecedented criticism. (Note the double meaning of ‘subject’ in the previous sentence!) With the waning of Sartrean Existentialism, the unfolding dynamics of that critique came to drive the most creative and influential figures in French intellectual life. What is meant by the “death of Man”? Does the human “self” have a “center,” or is the self a linguistic construction or the product of relations of power and desire? What are the alternatives to “humanism” which recent French philosophy offers? What are the political and social implications of the critique of “humanism”? What are the implications for our conception of “reason,” “history,” and “progress”? Can “humanism” be reformulated in the face of its post-modern critics?

Structure of the Course:

This course meets in-person on Tuesday afternoons. In accordance with University policy, we will wear masks and maintain appropriate physical distance in the classroom. To supplement our class meetings, I may occasionally record brief asynchronous lectures that should be viewed prior to our in-person sessions.

We will use Canvas to facilitate class communication and post reading assignments.

Keeping on top of the reading material and engaging actively in your learning are essential to your success in the course. The same goes for attendance and participation in our sessions.

Needless to say, in this and every course, you should view your professor as a resource in both good and bad times. I'm committed to helping you have as successful and rich a semester as possible!

Participation

Attendance at our meetings is mandatory. If you cannot attend a *specific* session, please notify me with a reasonable explanation **in advance** of the class.

Participation includes regular, active contributions to discussion. Please come to our meetings having read the assigned readings. Good participation can include responding to questions I pose, asking questions yourself, and weighing in on discussions.

Appropriate Use of Recordings and Other Online Content:

I will occasionally supplement our in-class meetings with asynchronous recorded material that you can access on Canvas. **Your use of these recordings is limited to this class**, meaning you should not share these recordings with anyone outside the class or otherwise reproduce their content. This policy exists to ensure the confidentiality of our classroom material and to honor the creativity and labor that I invested in creating course content.

Course Requirements:

Class Participation	25%
Class Presentation	10%
Response Papers	20%
Term Paper	45%

Response Papers

You will be required to write four short response papers (2-3 pages) based on the weekly reading assignments as indicated in the syllabus. You may decide which weeks you would like to write on; however, two of the papers must be submitted by Oct 5. These papers will be due at the time of class.

Presentation

Your class presentation should last 10-15 minutes and aim to accomplish two goals: 1) introduce the class to the relevant context for the readings, and 2) highlight some themes and/or problems that can serve to open the class discussion. In your presentation, do not simply summarize the assigned readings. Bring new materials into your presentation so that you can educate your fellow students on the topic of the seminar and raise questions that will help open the seminar discussion. In the interest of fairness, I will cut off any presentation that goes longer than 15 minutes.

Participation

Attendance at our meetings is mandatory. If you cannot attend a *specific* session, please notify me with a reasonable explanation **in advance** of the class. **Participation includes regular, active contributions to discussion.** Please come to our meetings having read the assigned readings. Try to think in advance of our meetings about the arguments and meaning of the readings, how they might connect to each other, and what is striking, problematic, or confusing. Good participation can include responding to questions I pose, asking questions yourself, and weighing in on discussions.

Term Paper

Your term paper should explore an author or authors in the course, although you may choose to expand toward figures not included in our syllabus. (You may also opt to explore some other aspect of French thought in this period not covered by the course, but you should consult with me.) You can pursue whatever angle interests you, but you should discuss your ideas with me before proceeding. This is not a full-blown research paper, but I do expect you to use both primary and secondary materials to deepen your knowledge and sharpen your argument. **The term paper should be 15-20 pages long, and it will be due on Dec 17th.**

Course Materials:

The following books may be purchased at the **Penn Book Store**, 3601 Walnut Street (ph. # 215-898-7595) and are also available at **Rosengarten Reserve**:

Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*

Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Derrida, *Positions*

Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. An Introduction, vol. I*

Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington

Readings drawn from my edited volume *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought, vol. II* are available in e-Book form:

<https://www-cambridge-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/core/books/cambridge-history-of-modern-european-thought/BF551EE77DA437A8C76E8F9DAAC68410>

Other readings will be posted in Canvas in the relevant weekly module. If possible, print these out and read them in hard copy. Have them readily available for use during our meetings. My experience, for what it's worth, is that students get more out of a text when they have it "in hand" and can annotate it.

Aug 31 Introduction

Sept 7 Humanism, Existentialism, and the Legacy of War

Ed Baring, "Existentialism and the Meanings of Transcendence," in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, vol. II, ed. Peter Gordon and Warren Breckman (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 128-152; Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism" in *Existentialism Basic Writings*, pp. 290-308; Sartre, "No Exit" in *No Exit and Three Other Plays*

Sept 14 The Rise of Structuralism

Camille Robcis, "Structuralism and the Return of the Symbolic," in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, vol. II, 464-489; François Dosse, "The Eclipse of a Star: Jean-Paul Sartre" and "The Birth of a Hero: Claude Lévi-Strauss," in *History of Structuralism*, vol. I, pp. 3-17; Ferdinand Saussure, "On the Nature of Language," in *Course in General Linguistics*; Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*

Sept 21 French Intellectuals and Decolonization

Judith Surkis, "Decolonization Terminable and Interminable," in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, vol. II, 438-463; Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, pp. 35-106, 206-248; Lévi-Strauss, "Race and History," in *Structural Anthropology*, vol. II, 323-362

Sept 28 Post-Structuralism: Jacques Derrida I

Ethan Kleinberg and Julian Bourg, "Post-Structuralism: From Deconstruction to the Genealogy of Power," in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, vol. II, 490-516; Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"

Oct 5 Post-Structuralism: Jacques Derrida II

Derrida, *Positions*; Warren Breckman, "Times of Theory: On Writing the History of French Theory," *Journal of the History of Ideas*

***** By now you should have completed two response papers *****

Oct 12 Power-Knowledge: Michel Foucault

Gary Gutting, "Michel Foucault: A User's Manual," in *The Cambridge Companion to Michel Foucault*, 1-28; Michel Foucault, excerpts from *Discipline and Punish* in *The Foucault Reader*, 169-238; Joseph Rouse, "Power/Knowledge," in *The Cambridge Companion to Michel Foucault*, 95-122

Oct 19 Post-Structuralism: Foucault

Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I; James Miller, "Foucault's Politics in Biographical Perspective"; David Halperin, "Bringing Out Michel Foucault"; Miller, "Policing Discourse: A Response"

Oct 26 The Linguistic Turn in French Psychoanalysis

Katja Guenther, "Psychoanalysis: Freud and Beyond," in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, vol. II, 44-71; Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage

as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience,” in *Écrits*; Malcolm Bowie, “Jacques Lacan,” in *Structuralism and Since*, pp. 116-153

***** You should be thinking hard about a term paper topic *****
I’m very happy to brainstorm with you!

Nov 2 ‘New Subjects’: Feminism from Existentialism to Post-Structuralism

Sandrine Sanos, “Late Modern Feminist Subversions: Sex, Subjectivity, and Embodiment,” in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, vol. II, 311-335; Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction to the Second Sex”; Beauvoir, “Destiny”; Helene Cixous, “Sorties”; Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which is not One”; Luce Irigaray, “Sexual Difference”

Nov 9 Postmodernism

Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition*; Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity” *New German Critique*, No. 22, Special Issue on Modernism. (Winter, 1981), pp. 3-14

Nov 16 Recasting the Debate? Castoriadis and the Project of Autonomy

Castoriadis, “The State of the Subject Today,” in *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, pp. 137-171; Warren Breckman, “Cornelius Castoriadis *contra* Postmodernism: Beyond the ‘French Ideology’,” *French Politics and Society*, vol. 16, 2 (Spring, 1998), 30-42; Breckman, “From the Symbolic Turn to the Social Imaginary: Castoriadis’s Project of Autonomy,” in *Adventures of the Symbolic: Postmarxism and Democratic Theory*, ch. 3

***** By now you should have completed your two remaining response papers *****

Nov 23 No Seminar (You should be working on your term paper!)

Nov 25 Thanksgiving!!!

Nov 30 Topic Presentations

Dec 9 Conclusion